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President: Mr. Buallay (Vice-President) ..... (Bahrain)

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Special economic, humanitarian and disaster relief assistance (*continued*)

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In the absence of the President, Mr. Buallay (Bahrain), Vice-President, took the Chair.

The meeting was called to order at 10:15 a.m.

Special economic, humanitarian and disaster relief assistance (*continued*) (A/57/77-E/2002/63 and A/57/79-E/2002/76)

Panel discussion on reaching the vulnerable in the context of complex humanitarian emergencies and natural disasters

1. **Ms. Bellamy** (Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)), Panellist, said that the panel discussion offered an opportunity to focus on children and families caught up in armed conflict and natural disasters and what they underwent. The reality faced by such vulnerable individuals was one of fleeing home and community, losing access to basic social care, living in a camp for refugees or displaced persons, living without adequate food, safe water or sanitation, and fearing abduction as a child soldier or sexual slave. Armed conflict had a disproportionate effect on women and children, who made up 80 per cent of refugees and internally displaced persons.

2. Vulnerability was worsened by exclusion from decision-making. Among those in that situation were the poor and the geographically or socially isolated, such as ethnic minorities, the internally displaced, nomadic groups and people living with HIV/AIDS, which spread more rapidly in countries in conflict or in humanitarian crisis. Vulnerability also increased as a result of natural disasters, which affected those already afflicted by poverty and disease most severely.

3. In such situations, the humanitarian response needed to be rapid enough to meet immediate needs but also measured enough to reduce vulnerability in the future by building on the capacities of the recipients of assistance. Vulnerability did not equal helplessness: individuals had developed their own ways of coping with the trauma and risks of war and disaster and were potentially strong contributors to their own development. They needed the support of the international community to exploit those abilities and the opportunity to be involved in planning, carrying out and monitoring humanitarian activities. That was particularly true of women and children, whose abilities and contributions were often overlooked.

4. Helping the most vulnerable was conditional on access. Most of those who died in armed conflict, particularly child victims, died not as a result of violence but as a result of poor access to basic health care, food, water and sanitation. For that reason, to continue to save lives, the United Nations system and its partners needed substantial political will to respect the ideal of safe and unobstructed access in all humanitarian crises. Access was particularly important in the case of children to ensure that they were receiving food, water, health care and schooling. Education was the best way to gain access to children and allowed the issue of their protection from exploitation to be addressed as well.

5. Access to the most vulnerable had often proved to be a costly exercise: humanitarian workers' safety and security was frequently threatened. Host governments, warring parties and the international community needed to uphold their responsibility to respect and protect such workers.

6. Fulfilling the aims of the Millennium Summit and the outcome document of the General Assembly special session on children required action on three fronts: first, finding enough resources to meet the basic needs of the most vulnerable on a sustained basis; second, obtaining safe and secure access to vulnerable individuals; third, providing protection to vulnerable individuals. As the delegates attending the special session on children had reminded the international community, making the world fit for children would make the world fit for everyone.

7. **Mr. Graisse** (Deputy Executive Director of the World Food Programme (WFP)), Panellist, said that WFP carried out regular vulnerability analyses often in partnership with other organizations, to gauge food needs, coping capacities and households' livelihood strategies. To ensure that food reached the most vulnerable, it sought to channel 80 per cent of food aid through women, involve women in decision-making, and give women more equal access to resources, employment, markets and trade. It worked with other United Nations entities to obtain access to vulnerable people and for purposes of needs assessment and the delivery, distribution and monitoring of food aid. It was essential to establish supply lines which could reach inhospitable areas; doing so had enabled winter famine to be averted in Afghanistan.

8. In southern Africa, where erratic rainfall, severe dry spells, an economic downturn, disrupted commercial farming and poor government decision-making had contributed to the crisis developing in Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Lesotho and Swaziland, WFP was focusing food distribution on districts that were most vulnerable and had a limited presence of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The most vulnerable individuals, including children, the elderly, expectant and nursing women and orphans would be helped through school feeding, supplementary feeding and therapeutic feeding activities. Areas affected by HIV/AIDS deserved special attention, as in Africa the role of good nutrition in slowing the development of HIV into AIDS was crucial. People living with HIV required more energy and protein, so rations were tailored to their needs.

9. In southern Africa, 10.2 million people would be receiving assistance through a WFP regional emergency operation to last until the next harvest. The large number of beneficiaries and the wide area over which they were spread presented a challenge. WFP would need to expand existing collaboration arrangements with NGOs and forge new NGO partnerships where necessary. The situation was complicated by the fact that many such organizations had geared their operations to supplying development assistance, and were not functioning in "emergency" mode. Another challenge was the logistical aspect of the operations. Firstly, close monitoring of the WFP aid pipeline would be required, to ensure that assistance reached the most needy. Secondly, it would be necessary to monitor the secondary NGO food-aid pipelines to ensure that advantage was taken of economies of scale and coordination in the use of port and inland transport infrastructure and local and regional procurement. The cooperation of host governments, and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) would be vital in eliminating potential bottlenecks such as road tolls and customs charges. WFP enforced zero tolerance of the use of food aid as a political bargaining chip or as a weapon.

10. An early response was essential in order to prevent suffering in southern Africa, where famine had been averted in 1992. It was to be hoped that that success could be duplicated. It was also important not to neglect the many vulnerable people in other countries, including Afghanistan, Liberia, Angola and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. The challenges of reaching such people in areas affected by complex emergencies and natural disasters were the same, and access depended on having the necessary resources and political will.

11. **Mr. Forster** (Vice-President of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)), Panellist, said that in 2001 ICRC had maintained a permanent presence in 69 countries and had conducted operations in 80 countries. Local presence, which was vital to gaining an understanding of the local situation, depended heavily on Red Cross and Red Crescent volunteers, especially in countries affected by conflict.

12. A central component of the ICRC mission was protection activities, which besides assistance to the civilian population, included visits to detainees and helping to reunite families. Its capacity to act depended on recognition of its role as a neutral and independent intermediary. To maintain that status, it was conscious of the need to avoid polemical discussion of the intentions of parties, legitimacy of response and attributing moral responsibility. While it sought to remain independent from other humanitarian bodies, it was conscious of the need to cooperate with other agencies so as to avoid duplication and preserve complementarity.

13. Thanks to its policy of neutrality, ICRC had been able to operate in very difficult circumstances. In Afghanistan, it had gained acceptance by all parties and obtained access to remote mountain areas which other humanitarian organizations had not reached. In Israel and the occupied and autonomous territories, its existing infrastructure had enabled it to make plans to increase the number of staff on the ground and step up food aid operations in the West Bank together with WFP. In Angola, since the signing of the 4 April ceasefire agreement, the main thrust of ICRC activity had been protection and the tracing and reuniting of families.

14. Lack of security was a persistent concern and was related to a complex set of factors. The threshold of tolerance was difficult to determine, particularly in identity-based conflicts and where state structures had collapsed. The problem was worsened by economic considerations, such as the pursuit by individuals of financial gain or the control and exploitation of natural resources.

15. ICRC saw its intervention on the ground as being based on international humanitarian law, which

provided a sound basis for impartiality. Its missions of assistance and protection were not separate, but inextricably linked. It sought to keep civilians safe from abuses of power and to come to the aid of victims. It believed in a holistic approach to helping victims but also recognized the need for targeted assistance to meet specific needs, such as those of women and children. Those considerations underpinned its efforts to support families and restore family links destroyed by conflict. Internally displaced persons were covered by the traditional ICRC mandate, not treated as a separate group. Determining just how to distinguish such individuals from residents or returnees was difficult, particularly in Africa, where many sought safety with relatives, who also needed support.

16. The approach of ICRC to its mission was unique: it sought to provide assistance and protection based firstly on international humanitarian law and secondly on its status as a neutral and independent body operating in close proximity to victims. That approach also allowed the ICRC to operate in cooperation with other humanitarian entities on a basis of complementarity.

17. **Mr. Mountain** (United Nations, Office for the Coordinator of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Assistant Emergency Relief Coordinator), Panellist, said that reaching the vulnerable, an essential precondition for the delivery of humanitarian assistance, typically posed four immediate challenges: securing access to disaster/emergency victims, ensuring security for humanitarian workers, establishing a structure to identify and reach those in need (coordination, logistics, communication, information), and mobilizing the necessary resources and supplies. Humanitarian assistance must be provided impartially, irrespective of gender, colour, ethnic origin or political opinion, solely on the basis of need.

18. The simultaneous occurrence of armed conflict and natural disaster was not as uncommon as it might seem. In the first half of 2002, two major natural disasters had taken place in the context of complex humanitarian emergencies: the eruption of the Mount Nyirangongo volcano in the town of Goma, Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the earthquakes in the Nahrin district of Afghanistan. While, in such double crises, the fundamentals of the humanitarian response remained the same, greater speed and better coordination were called for. The three key elements of effective coordination were: a clear plan, including an appropriate division of labour; rapid mobilization of needed resources; and the establishment of timely and effective information services.

19. Experienced personnel must be immediately on site to assess situations and needs and establish response mechanisms when governments were unable to fulfil that role. The United Nations system had developed mechanisms for rapid deployment to that end, including United Nations Disaster Assessment Coordination (UNDAC) teams managed by OCHA.

20. Humanitarian personnel already deployed for complex emergency operations could facilitate a rapid response to a natural disaster, as they had in Goma. However, since natural disasters often required specialized skills and expertise that were not immediately available (e.g., in Goma, there had been no volcanologists to provide scientific advice), humanitarian agencies should incorporate foreseeable natural disasters in their contingency planning and strengthen their capacity for rapid deployment of specialist resources.

21. Sometimes media coverage could help mobilize urgently needed resources in a combined complex emergency and natural disaster. For example, the volcano near Goma had drawn attention to an area largely ignored during nearly four years of violent conflict. However, when natural disasters were overlooked by the international community, a rapid source of adequate resources was vital. He therefore welcomed the efforts of a number of donor governments and the European Union to set up standby mechanisms. There was also a need to set up a coordination structure at the national, international and local levels and a mechanism to provide reliable information as a vital tool for both coordination and mobilization of resources.

22. **Mr. Charpentier** (United Nations Humanitarian Coordinator and Resident Coordinator for Burundi), Panellist, said that the fragility of the peace process initiated in Burundi with the signing of the August 2000 agreement posed a particular challenge for humanitarian intervention. The conflict had reached a new peak, yet there had never been so great an opportunity for negotiation between the Government and the armed opposition groups. The humanitarian situation remained precarious: between 450,000 and 500,000 refugees were living outside the country,

primarily in the United Republic of Tanzania; over 400,000 people were internally displaced within Burundi; and at any given moment, between 50,000 and 200,000 people were displaced by conflicts in one region or another.

23. It was extremely difficult to carry out humanitarian operations in areas subject to insecurity. The key challenges were: to provide continuous assistance in those areas; to protect internally displaced persons, of whom women were both highly vulnerable to violence and valuable actors in recovery and reconstruction; to obtain reliable information on the insecure areas; and to carry out operations under the constraints imposed by the elaborate system designed to ensure the safety of humanitarian workers.

24. In 2001, a framework had been developed to protect internally displaced and other vulnerable persons. It included the Burundi Minister of Defence, Minister of the Interior, and Minister for Repatriation and Resettlement of Refugees and Displaced Persons, and representatives of United Nations agencies and national and international NGOs, a composition which reflected the Government's primary responsibility to provide humanitarian workers with access and protection. The framework provided a forum for dialogue between national and external authorities in the search for joint solutions to Burundi's problems and had resulted in the formation of a follow-up technical group as its operational and monitoring arm.

25. When, for example, rebels had occupied the Kinama section of Bujumbura for two weeks in 2001, displacing 50,000 residents, a team had been set up to make daily visits and, once the rebels had been evicted by the army, to ensure the displaced persons' safe return. For reasons relating to sociological bias, the army battalion assigned to monitor that process had, in fact, been attacking the returnees and had had to be replaced by a different battalion.

26. The establishment of a dialogue between humanitarian workers and the armed opposition groups had been a lengthy, sensitive process but had improved humanitarian operations, particularly in insecure areas. Through transparency, trust and an absence of political considerations, the parties to the conflict had been led to adopt a humanitarian perspective. One result was the creation of ad hoc humanitarian corridors so that assistance could be provided to specific groups of internally displaced persons, but the only real solution would be a ceasefire.

27. **The President** asked the United Nations Assistant Emergency Relief Coordinator to serve as moderator for the question-and-answer portion of the panel discussion.

28. **Mr. Nteturuye** (Burundi) said that the Office of the Humanitarian Coordinator and Resident Coordinator for Burundi and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) office in Bujumbura had been of great help in addressing the humanitarian needs of the thousands of Burundians who had been physically and morally devastated by war. However, his Government found it difficult to understand the position taken by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which had suspended assistance to the refugees returning to the southern and eastern provinces. He understood the uneasiness of UNHCR, given the level of insecurity in those provinces. However, the situation was improving: most of the formerly exiled political leaders had returned to Burundi and had assumed posts in the transitional institutions established in November 2001. Moreover, the refugee camps were subject to attack by bandits who forcibly recruited refugees to armed opposition groups. Given the choice of becoming involuntary "cannon fodder" or facing a difficult return to their families and friends in a country that was, after all, habitable, many had chosen the latter option.

29. In the light of that de facto situation, he hoped that UNHCR would reconsider its position, particularly as Burundi's other development partners were reluctant to intervene in areas which the United Nations had classified as Phase III and Phase IV security levels. Lives were being lost while representatives of the Government, NGOs and United Nations agencies discussed the matter. At the 2000 and 2001 donor conferences in Paris and Geneva, respectively, it had been decided that the armed opposition must not be allowed to hold the entire country hostage and that of the people of Burundi, who sought peace, should be helped. However, the promised funds were slow to arrive, and he feared that the international community was being influenced by extremists who wanted the peace process to fail.

30. **Mr. Backström** (Finland) asked the panellists whether there were any statistics on the number of people who required assistance but received none, not

only during complex emergencies covered by the consolidated appeals process but during natural disasters and other types of emergency. For example, hundreds of thousands of new aid recipients had recently been identified in Angola, and it had been reported that there were millions of vulnerable people in the jungles of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. He also wondered at what stage a recipient was considered no longer eligible for aid and whether United Nations agencies and NGOs used the same criteria of vulnerability in establishing that threshold.

31. **Mr. Flores Gómez** (Mexico) said that his country's National System of Civilian Protection, which integrated and complemented emergency and disaster responses at all levels (national, state and local) in Mexico's federal structure, had recently begun focusing on prevention as well as reaction. The Natural Disaster Fund was now authorized to set aside up to 20 per cent of its budget every year as reserves for the System's new prevention component.

32. He suggested that other countries should also establish emergency and natural disaster funds and that a similar fund at the international level should be launched within the United Nations, including a prevention component for the poorest countries, which were also the most vulnerable to disasters. Studies had shown that the poorest sectors of society tended to live in high-risk places, such as hillsides, river banks and beaches, and were therefore the most vulnerable. The question was always the same: how best to help the vulnerable populations. Perhaps the solution was to finance specific projects for prevention that included implementing mechanisms such as supply-management and disaster-inventory systems. Assistance could also be provided within specific contexts, such as training programmes or with the installation of early-warning systems or other equipment.

33. At the outset, an international group should be created to monitor, compile and analyse studies by various international organizations on civilian protection and disaster prevention with a view to formulating specific proposals for national and international funds. Through civilian protection awareness-building campaigns, populations must be encouraged to participate in their design. An immediate response programme should be offered to those living in high-risk places in order to train them in first-aid responses pending the arrival of rescue and evacuation teams. Input from residents of vulnerable areas would be invaluable to specialists engaged in risk-assessment mapping.

34. **Mr. Højersholt** (Observer for Denmark) said that he wholeheartedly agreed with the Executive Director of UNICEF that vulnerability did not equal helplessness and that disaster victims were potentially strong contributors to their own development. Such an approach would ensure that their human rights were better respected, their needs better met and their skills better developed. It might also be useful to promote self-reliance through community service or small-scale business and agriculture grants.

35. Turning to the presentation by the representative of WFP, he said it was obvious that response strategies for southern Africa would have to rely on careful targeting of the most vulnerable populations. It was generally acknowledged that the humanitarian crisis in that region had been caused by a combination of natural and manmade disasters, including drought, flooding, failed government policies and devastated economies. Moreover, southern Africa had faced widespread famine on a number of occasions, most recently in 1992; he wondered what could be done to increase resilience and prevent a recurrence of the problem. National Governments must assume greater responsibility for reducing conditions of vulnerability, bearing in mind the need for long-term rehabilitation of the agricultural sector. He asked how WFP viewed the development of policy dialogue with governments on such issues and what role the Southern African Development Community (SADC) could play in facilitating such a dialogue.

36. **Mr. Morikawa** (Japan) asked what measures had been taken to promote the cooperation between donor and recipients witnessed during the two volcanic eruptions discussed. Turning to the remarks made by the representative of Burundi, he asked what stages had been necessary to achieve the satisfactory relationship existing between the Government and the international presence on the one hand and the opposition armed groups on the other.

37. **Ms. Bellamy** (Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund), Panellist, said that, whereas in the first half of the twentieth century most victims of war had been military personnel, in the second half they had been mainly civilians, many of them women and children. It was encouraging that some women had resolved to find solutions to their plight, one example

being a group of women in Somalia who, transcending clan differences, had together started a school so that their children would receive an education despite the conflict situation. Another motive force for peace was the Children's Peace Movement in Colombia. The clarity and honesty of some of the young people who had addressed the Security Council attested to their determination to take action on their own behalf, rather than remain in a situation of dependence.

38. Since natural disasters were hard to prevent and had greatest consequences for the very poor, she agreed that poverty reduction should be part of preventive action. As to when vulnerability came to an end, it was important that the international community should be measured in its response to sustained vulnerability by building self-reliance among recipients. Timing was an important factor. While water had to be provided as a matter of urgency in the wake of an earthquake, it was important to go on to the stage of building capacity so that dependency was not protracted; yet, by that time, all too often the media and, hence, the public had lost interest.

39. **Mr. Graisse** (Deputy Executive Director of the World Food Programme), Panellist, said that the millions who went hungry every day required access to food, either by being lifted out of poverty or in the form of direct food aid. Yet, only one tenth of the world's starving had received help in 2001. Despite the WFP vulnerability assessment mapping programme, tough decisions were called for as to where shrinking resources should be spent, often at the expense of equally needy areas. Policy dialogue was conducted with governments on matters such as the distribution of grain and NGO cooperation in food distribution. Also, SADC had been approached and offered assistance. With the cooperation of the Rwandan Government, which had made available its surplus emergency resources, it had been possible to respond rapidly to the victims of the two volcanic eruptions in Goma.

40. **Mr. Forster** (Vice-President of the International Committee of the Red Cross), Panellist, said that vulnerability could continue for a long time; the re-establishment of family units or determining the fate of missing persons, for example, could take years or even decades. Assistance included the re-establishment of economic security, the viability of households and projects to provide agricultural inputs in rural areas. A situation could change for the worse even in a post-conflict situation, making it difficult to determine when those concerned were no longer vulnerable — hence the permanent network of regional delegates who monitored and evaluated situations of vulnerability.

41. **Mr. Mountain** (United Nations Assistant Emergency Relief Coordinator (OCHA)), Panellist, said it would be naïve to suggest that the needs of all vulnerable people could be met, even though a great deal was being done by groups such as the consortia of NGOs and the Red Cross. There would certainly be a stage at which vulnerability needs would be seen as part of poverty reduction programmes, as the societies concerned became more stable. Following the volcanic eruptions near Goma, large segments of the population had fled to safety in Rwanda, but many of them had returned before it was really safe to do so in order to ensure that their property was secure. There remained the danger of further volcanic activity and the collaboration established with the Rwandan authorities continued.

42. In connection with the suggestion made by the representative of Mexico, he said that United Nations standby funding for rehabilitation efforts did exist, and OCHA had responsibility for small amounts of money for immediate coordination on the ground as emergencies occurred. While everyone involved in natural disaster relief believed in strengthening measures for providing housing, training and contingency planning for immediate response, it was also important to mobilize the community to provide its own response. For instance, it was a well-known fact that people buried under earthquake rubble were often rescued by their neighbours.

43. **Mr. Charpentier** (United Nations Humanitarian Coordinator and Resident Coordinator for Burundi), Panellist, replying to the question posed by the representative of Burundi, said that approximately 30,000 refugees had returned to Burundi, some on their own and others with assistance. From the humanitarian point of view, assistance must continue to be provided to the refugees in order to enable them to return safely and reintegrate in village life. The security situation in the eastern provinces was being closely monitored, and UNHCR would undoubtedly modify its decision when circumstances permitted. He agreed that it was important to promote the self-reliance of the Burundians and felt that simultaneous relief and development assistance was the best approach. Substantial donor support to that end had just been

solicited, but the response thus far fell far short of what was needed.

44. Replying to the representative of Japan, he said that establishing contact with members of armed opposition groups had been an elaborate and lengthy process, whose thorniest and most time-consuming elements had been gaining the confidence of external partners and ensuring transparency between the parties to the conflict. Improved relations between the Government and the armed opposition groups, coupled with greater intervention by external humanitarian partners in recent years, had greatly facilitated the launching of the open tripartite dialogue between the Government, members of armed opposition groups and the humanitarian community.

45. **Ms. Golberg** (Observer for Canada) wondered whether neighbouring countries and local embassies could be called on for help in maintaining access by humanitarian workers. Referring to the dialogue with armed factions described by the previous speaker, she enquired whether the representative of OCHA could report on the status of the handbook on establishing contact with armed groups mentioned in the report of the Secretary-General to the Security Council on the protection of civilians in armed conflicts. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee had also developed a handbook on obtaining access to vulnerable groups under its Sheltering Tree Project.

46. **Mr. Garvelink** (United States of America) commended the activities of the United Nations and ICRC and the decision to give top priority to humanitarian workers' access to vulnerable groups and expressed support for the WFP approach to coordinating relief efforts in southern Africa, particularly its cooperation with non-governmental organizations. The success of the humanitarian information centres, particularly in Kosovo, Afghanistan and Sierra Leone, should be highlighted. He wondered whether the nutrition and rehabilitation activities which WFP conducted for small subsistence farmers took into account the HIV/AIDS problem.

47. **Ms. Mahouve Same** (Cameroon) asked what measures were being taken by governments, with assistance from United Nations agencies, to provide relief to scores of vulnerable persons suffering from HIV/AIDS, malnutrition and other health problems in temporary security zones in Burundi.

48. **Mr. Mountain** (United Nations Assistant Emergency Relief Coordinator (OCHA)), Panellist, said that the handbook on civilian protection referred to by the Observer for Canada was still a work in progress.

49. **Mr. Forster** (Vice-President of the International Committee of the Red Cross), Panellist, agreed with the representative of Canada on the importance of maintaining an open and transparent dialogue with all the parties to a conflict. However, in circumstances where that might not be possible, dialogue could be sought with actors who had a direct link to the parties to the conflict and were likely to have an influence on them. For example, in the past year, ICRC had attempted to establish links with economic actors.

50. **Mr. Graisse** (Deputy Executive Director of the World Food Programme), Panellist, said that, without the $135 million contributed by the United States, the Programme would be far less effective. Children who had become heads of household as a result of the rapidly spreading AIDS epidemic in southern Africa were currently the main recipients of food aid. The epidemic also affected their schooling. Teachers fell victim to AIDS, and small farmers incapacitated by AIDS were often forced to take their children out of school and put them to work. In its emergency operations, WFP distributed supplementary food at health centres as a way of encouraging AIDS victims who had contracted other diseases, such as tuberculosis, to complete their course of treatment. The need for greater quantities of special drugs in such cases was pushing up the cost of WFP emergency operations.

51. **Mr. Charpentier** (United Nations Humanitarian Coordinator and Resident Coordinator for Burundi), replying to the representative of Cameroon, said that the security situation was determined by the United Nations system. Personnel on the ground understood that the security situation was changing and that a declaration of "unsafe" could be lifted. Two thirds of Burundi territory was considered "sufficiently safe" for humanitarian and development activities and for personnel to have access, even at night. Only the rural areas east of Bujumbura and a few other provinces were still classified as "unsafe". Nonetheless, personnel of the United Nations system and NGOs, particularly humanitarian workers, monitored the situation in the temporary security zones on a daily

basis, and barring troop movements or actual conflict, entered by day.

52. **Mr. Mountain** (United Nations Assistant Emergency Relief Coordinator (OCHA)), summarizing the panel discussion, said that access by humanitarian workers to vulnerable populations, particularly displaced persons, women and children, was of major concern to all. Emphasis had been placed on the importance of: negotiating with the parties to a conflict; not equating vulnerability with helplessness; involving beneficiaries in planning and implementation; preventing the deaths of persons caught in the crossfire, where split-second timing could mean the difference between life and death; and guaranteeing the safety and security of humanitarian workers.

53. As for natural disasters, the main themes had been: strengthening the response capacities of local communities; understanding the relationship between inadequate development and vulnerability to natural disasters; and improving standby mechanisms for both funding and information.

The meeting rose at 12.55 p.m.